

# Protests in Moscow: What's Different This Time?

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Opposition activists held one-man pickets across Moscow this past Saturday, the latest action in six consecutive weekends of demonstrations. Protestors are demanding that opposition candidates be allowed on the ballot in upcoming City Duma elections, and for the release of those detained at previous rallies. This summer's demonstrations have a few distinguishing characteristics that suggest Russia has entered a new political era, one that could force the Kremlin into some difficult decisions ahead of upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

First, protests have been massive. With over 50,000 attendees, the officially sanctioned August 10 protest marked the largest since 2011-2012 Bolotnaya demonstrations. Despite credible threats of arrest, an unsanctioned protest on July 27 drew thousands of protestors, of whom more than 1,000 were detained. In the politically consequential Russian capital, 37 percent of Muscovites have voiced support for the protests, while 30 percent were neutral and 27 percent did not support them. These numbers refute the official line in state news outlets that recent protests are marginal.

Second, and anecdotally, a wider range of Russians are showing up at protests. While political activism in Russia is often compartmentalized among specific groups (Russians in the 18-25-year old category gave life to the 2017-2018 anti-corruption protests, and last year, pensioners turned out in numbers to protest pension reform), over the past six weekends Muscovites of varied ages and socioeconomic statuses have protested side by side. Some are new to politics entirely. One of Russia's most well-known rappers, Oxxxymoron, announced his (unauthorized) performance at the August 10 rally to an audience of million-plus Instagram followers. He was joined on stage by other well-known performers taking their first public political stances, and presumably in the crowd by thousands of supporters heeding a call to action.

Third, protestors appear to hold mixed political views. A medley of signs and political banners appeared at recent demonstrations, underscoring that attendees do not all fall into what we normally think of as Russia's opposition, for instance, supporters of anti-corruption campaigner Aleksey Navalny. Rather, Muscovites of different political stripes are offended by what they see as a blatantly rigged election. On August 17, a separate rally organized by Russia's Communist Party took place under the banner "For clean and honest elections!" Videos of excessive police violence, particularly on July 27, seem to have touched a nerve in Moscow that has led a range of pundits and political voices to speak out in favor of the protests.

Fourth, the state's response to protests has been unusually harsh. The newly created National Guard was deployed by the thousands to quell the unauthorized protest on July 27. Thousands were detained, many violently. Dozens are facing charges of inciting "mass unrest," which carries up to eight years in prison. Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation is facing unprecedented political pressure in the form of an anti-money-laundering investigation by Russia's powerful Investigative Committee. Navalny himself is serving a 30-day jail sentence, and several other protest leaders have been repeatedly jailed, among them Ilya Yashin, whose disqualification from Moscow city elections sparked this round of protests (he was projected to win the race for Moscow's 45th Krasnoselsky district), and Lyubov Sobol, a prominent lawyer with the Anti-Corruption Foundation who was running in Moscow's 43rd District. The severity of the state response to protests in the Russian capital suggests it understands the political threat posed by growing protests and is determined to stem them.

Weeks of demonstrations in Moscow cap an uptick in political activism across Russia over the past two years. Years of falling real incomes have contributed to a general sense of restiveness: Russians' willingness to protest is the highest in two decades, and the number of demonstrations recorded in Russia in 2018 was nearly double the number in 2017. In the past year, protests over waste disposal practices in Arkhangelesk, the construction of an Orthodox church in a public park in Yekaterinburg, the arrest of journalist Ivan Golunov on dubious drug charges in Moscow, and now the exclusion of opposition candidates from Moscow City Duma elections suggest a new normal in Russia, in which ordinary people are demanding a say in the political system. While the Kremlin has tolerated some local-level activism addressing quality of life and corruption issues (such as the Yekaterinburg protests, which led President Putin to halt the church's construction), the current protests in Moscow are overtly political and are seen by the government as an unacceptable threat.

Both inside and outside of Moscow, Russians' growing willingness to speak out seems in part the result of economic stagnation, which has frayed the traditional social contract of political acquiescence for a higher standard of living, allowing local-level issues to gain political momentum.

But despite a general malaise and the use of a common tactic—protests—to amplify grievances, these movements remain local in nature, and it is unclear if or how they could gain national traction that could in some way alter the status quo at the national level. The challenge for the opposition is first in articulating common themes from local-level grievances in order to connect and sustain these movements, and then in gaining footholds in regional and municipal elections. As the striking of opposition candidates from the Moscow City Duma election demonstrates, the movement faces clear structural disadvantages.

At the same time, this uptick in activism across Russia occurs in the context of an impending political transition, and upcoming elections could provide an occasion for the opposition to channel widely felt anger toward shaping the outcome. In advance of the

2021 parliamentary elections and, eventually, the 2024 presidential elections, support for the ruling United Russia party is at its lowest in over 13 years, and trust in Putin is its lowest since 2006, at 31.7 percent, though his popularity rating seems to have steadied at 68 percent. Local-level protests in Moscow, Arkhangelsk, Yekaterinburg, and elsewhere do not pose a direct threat to the government, but taken together they highlight the incompetence and corruption of local managers that exist within the system and could weigh on the Kremlin's decision about how to handle the upcoming elections.

Through protests, Russians have signaled a new readiness to make their voices heard, even if the outcome or goal of demonstrations is not always clear. If it grows, this expectation—to be listened to— may shape the environment in which an impending political transition occurs. A smooth change of power will necessitate a degree of trust from the public. An erosion of this trust just at the time when it is most needed means political transition may not happen solely on the Kremlin's terms.

*Cyrus Newlin is an adjunct fellow (non-resident) with the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Jeffrey Mankoff is deputy director and senior fellow with the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program.*

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